

NOTES ON ACCEPTED SIGHT RECORDS OF BIRDS IN SRI LANKA¹

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In connection with my notes on some Sri Lankan birds (Hoffmann 1989) as listed by Ripley (1982), Dr Ripley had requested additional information in regard to the various sight records mentioned in the paper. Out of 81 species treated there, 16 are documented by sight records only. In view of possible wider interest the additional explanatory details are embodied in the present contribution which may be regarded as a supplement to the earlier paper. Also included here are 3 species in respect of which recent sight records appear more relevant than old specimens. Numbers and names are again identical with those of Ripley (1982).

All new records which are based on sightings only, including those listed by Phillips (1978), have been carefully scrutinised by the Ceylon Bird Club Rarities Committee. It has become almost impossible to collect bird specimens in Sri Lanka, and it would be unreasonable to exclude all sight records as such. The Committee took into account three main aspects: the quality and details of the description, the likelihood of the species occurring in Sri Lanka and the standing and reliability of the observer. Details in respect of the 19 species are as follows:

63. White stork *Ciconia ciconia*

This unmistakable bird has been sighted several times in the last century and again since the middle of this century by reliable observers (CBCN)³.

153. Longlegged buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

On 26 January 1988 Ben King of the American Museum of Natural History, Bird Department, together with James and Robert Clements, identified a longlegged buzzard, probably a first-year bird, at Horton Plains National Park (elevation approximately 2134 m). A careful description was supplied.

376. Caspian plover

Charadrius asiaticus asiaticus

One specimen collected by Phillips in 1951; next seen 1960. In recent years frequent, almost regular, winter sightings in Bundala-Hambantota area, three in 1985, one in 1986, seven in 1987, all by reliable Bird Club members.

378. Ringed plover

Charadrius hiaticula tundrae

Only two sightings before 1973. Since then mainly single birds are seen almost every winter in various parts of the dry zone (e.g. Bundala) by very reliable Bird Club members such as T.S.U. De Zylva, John and Judy Banks, and also by myself. There can be no doubt. Most of the birds have been seen in the Bundala Sanctuary, around Hambantota, a few in the Mannar area, one or two in Yala National Park and Wilpattu National Park.

403. Asian dowitcher

Limnodromus semipalmatus

One bird noticed by C. Brewster of Derry, Northern Ireland, at Karagan Lewaya near Hambantota on 22 July 1982, first together with some blacktailed godwits *Limosa limosa*, then among a party of common redshanks *Tringa totanus totanus*. He suspected the Asian dowitcher which was confirmed as most likely by Dave Allan on the basis of Brewster's notes. As small numbers of this species are known to visit eastern India and Bangladesh, a stray specimen could well reach Sri Lanka.

413. Great or eastern knot

Calidris tenuirostris

First reported by Ben King from Mannar when one was seen amongst a flock of knots on 27 February 1981. King gave a detailed description. In February 1983 A. Mac Greham and three others saw several great knots in a flock of knots at Mannar and they too supplied careful descriptions. The knot *Calidris canutus canutus* too is a rare winter vagrant to the northern coasts of Sri Lanka.

¹Accepted June 1989.

²Ceylon Bird Club, P.O. Box 11, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

³Ceylon Bird Club Notes (monthly since 1944).

423. Spoonbilled sandpiper

Eurynorhynchus pygmeus

First reported by Ben King from Bundala on 2 March 1978.

425a. Buffbreasted sandpiper

Tryngites subruficollis

First bird obtained by T.S.U. De Zylva on 5 March 1960. Subsequently also seen by J.C. Sinclair of Durban (S.A.) at Trincomalee in November 1974 and again by T.S.U. De Zylva at Embilikala Kalapuwa in the Bundala Sanctuary on 19 January 1985, when good photographs of the bird were taken. A Nearctic species which one would not readily expect in Sri Lanka (no records from Indian subcontinent), but the evidence is indisputable.

427. Rednecked phalarope

Phalaropus lobatus

The first sighting in the Jaffna area by G.M. Henry in 1944 remained the sole record till the early '80s. Since then small flocks (up to six) are regularly seen every winter in the Bundala, Hambantota and Kalametiya area by John and Judy Banks and others.

447. Pomatorhine skua

Stercorarius pomarinus

Single specimen from Colombo in 1912. Sight record 1954 in Hambantota. Then in 1978 several were identified by van den Berg *et al.* (1982) accompanying the mass movement of bridled terns *Sterna anaethetus* along the coast at Colombo. As this migration is an annual event, this skua is probably also a regular visitor to the Sri Lankan west coast.

455. Blackheaded gull *Larus ridibundus*

This species was first reported by J.C. Sinclair from Nilaveli (east coast) in November 1974. In December 1976 P.A. Dukes saw one at Arugam Bay, in February 1981 Ben King and party noted one at Talaimannar, and on 8 March 1978 one was seen by Robert Fleming, Jr. at Yala. In flight it can be quite readily distinguished from the brownheaded gull *Larus brunicephalus* with which it might be confused, but it may be easily overlooked by local bird watchers (CBCN).

456. Slenderbilled gull

Larus genei

Seen on 2 September 1978 by Berg (1982) and two others along the causeway at Mannar. This remains the only record.

480. Sandwich tern

Sterna sandvicensis sandvicensis

No specimen but a number of reliable sight records and one ring recovery without specimen (Hoffmann 1987).

910. Sand martin

Riparia riparia

First sight record in January 1976 from Anuradhapura. Subsequently seen on telegraph wires near Hambantota in February 1981, and since then almost annually by various bird watchers and visiting ornithologists from U.K. and U.S.A., some of whom also have obtained photographs. All recent sightings of up to 10 birds together (usually with eastern swallows, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*) have been in the extreme south from Kalametiya through Hambantota to Bundala.

933. Grey shrike

Lanius excubitor lahtora

First reliable sight record in 1940 near Kekirawa, second in 1974 near Murunkan. Since then several reliable observations, at Yala (1986) and in the Hills (Hantane 1985, Haputale 1987).

988. Greyheaded myna

Sturnus malabaricus blythii

A small flock of 11 birds noted in January 1984 at Anuradhapura by B.A. Dukes, a British ornithologist. Dukes and others saw the birds again in subsequent years (1985 and 1986) at the same place, and five birds were noted in the south at Kalametiya (1985) in a very large assembly of brahminy mynas *Sturnus pagodarum* and rosy pastors *Sturnus roseus*, and in Yala. In 1986 and 1987 several immatures were noted by Dukes in the flock at Anuradhapura, and it is very likely that the species is now a breeding resident in Sri Lanka, in small numbers.

1710. Desert wheatear

Oenanthe deserti

Seen by R.W. Lekkerkerk of Holland on 13 February 1986 at Bundala. He supplied a very careful and detailed description which does not leave room for doubt. The only record so far.

1852. Indian tree pipit

Anthus hodgsoni hodgsoni

A flock reported in January 1982 by Robert Fleming, Jr. at Anuradhapura. Subsequently two and one seen in the Wilpattu National Park.

1891. Large pied wagtail

Motacilla maderaspatensis

One ancient specimen from Jaffna is recorded (Phillips 1978). First sight record November 1976 by P.B. Karunaratne from Mahaweli riverbed near Kandy; seen in same place in the following year, also by other observers, and again in December 1980 and January

1981. In 1983 two birds were seen on Delft Island, and in January 1984 one at Punkudutivu off Jaffna. I have seen three of these birds and feel that the species might be breeding on northern islands.

Since about 1978 there have been discoveries of new species for Sri Lanka, mainly winter migrants, almost every year, chiefly by visiting ornithologists. Due to the unsettled conditions in the country during recent years, such visits have sharply declined, and so have new sightings. The expected revival of tourism will doubtless produce further exciting discoveries in the years to come.

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